

A BRIDGE IN BLYTHE A PANORAMA IN WATERLOO AND A VORTEX IN TIME: PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE NOVELS OF W.G. SEBALD

Initially I was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison.
Vladimir Nabokov - *Speak Memory*

There is in every photograph: the return of the dead.
Roland Barthes - *Camera Lucida*

W. G. Sebald died in December of 2001 in a car accident in Norwich England during a particularly bad winter when the roads had turned to ice. "I don't think you can write from a compromised moral position" he had said in an interview earlier that year. It's a position that would put him at odds with much of the contemporary publishing industry. He was uneasy about cultural truisms or doctrines regardless of their acceptance in the academic milieu in which he lived. From the age of 46 to his death at 57 he published four novels that have been translated into English: *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *Vertigo* and *Austerlitz*. He published two posthumous books: an essay on the ambiguities in the relations between aggressor and victim called *On the Natural History of Destruction* and a collaboration with the fellow Bavarian artist Jan Peter Tripp called *Unrecounted*. Sebald from his beginnings always seemed able to scrupulously capture some sense of emotional dislocation that was linked to the lived experience of shifting historical realities. In his novels a character's delicate psyche was always rubbing up against the brutal histories that he/she inhabits and these two worlds seemed to co-exist in some way that was undefined yet palpably mysterious and malevolent and perhaps ultimately unknowable. There was an intuitive sense of the organic co-existence of all

things, along with a strong sense of the relation between chance and historical determinism – in short Sebald's art was rooted in paradox.

W. G. Sebald was born on Wertach im Allgau, Germany. In 1966 he became an assistant lecturer at the University of Manchester in England, where he settled for good in 1970. He taught at the University of East Anglia from that time to his death in December of 2001. His novels from the beginning often had a German emigrant living in England as one of the characters, yet the autobiographical nature of the narratives was ambiguous. The sentences often run on in his work and the narrative voices are sometimes superimposed as in Conrad, but without the exotic associations with the "primitive" that run through Conrad. They were elliptical and episodic to the extreme, as conscious of the European literary tradition in their careful construction as Nabokov (who inhabits the narrative of *The Immigrants* at different stages of his life). Their apparent open structure belied a highly formal architecture, a counterpoint of narrative strategies such as travel literature, history, essay and most insistently memoirs. The first person narrator always seemed to come from another level of consciousness already divorced from human concerns, beyond anger or lust or death. It was as if the author was already dead or perhaps beyond death. It appeared that the vortex of history, of facts, had swallowed the narrator up and that he spoke from its depths, as haunted as any character in Poe or Borges. The narratives of various lives often interpenetrated, rendering them as evanescent landscapes lit up by fireworks before returning to darkness. They seemed, for this reason, moribund, already a kind of obituary for our own time before our time was

up. There were images throughout the books such as official portraits, handwritten notes, post-cards and most conspicuously snapshots that froze some oblique moment in time.

The Emigrants begins with a photograph of a large tree surrounded by an old graveyard.

The text after this startling opening begins the first of four narratives: “Dr. Henry Selwyn” : “At the end of September 1970, shortly before I took up my position in Norwich, I drove out to Hingham with Clara in search of somewhere to live.” The book opens with a paradox. The photograph of the tree in the graveyard can’t help but suggest both death and the endless organic recycling of life in various forms. The text opens with the laconic first person “I” searching for new beginnings – a house with Clara – in search of “somewhere to live”. This would be the search for all the narrators in *The Emigrants* and in a sense all of the narrators in every book Sebald wrote. In that beginning the paradoxes of factual matter (gravestones under a tree) and narrative movement (searching for a home) come into play and set the stage for the dramas that follow.

The works often used the language of travel literature familiar from magazines devoted to it. There would then be sudden shifts to historical narratives whose authenticity was, despite the seemingly serious tone, questionable. Readers sometimes wrote to him explaining “mistakes” in the novels. From *The Rings of Saturn* we get a good idea of Sebalds’ themes and his dry sense of humor: “Not far from the coast, between Southwold and Walberswick, a narrow iron bridge crosses the river Blyth where a long time ago ships heavily laden with wool made their way seaward...According to local historians, the train that ran on it had originally been built for the Emperor of China. Precisely

which emperor had given this commission I have not succeeded in finding out, despite lengthy research; nor have I been able to discover why the order was never delivered or why this diminutive imperial train, which may have been intended to connect the Palace in Peking, then still surrounded by pinewoods, to one of the summer residences, ended up in service on a branch line of the Great Eastern Railway. The only thing the uncertain sources agree on is that the outlines of the imperial heraldic dragon, complete with a tail and somewhat clouded over by its own breath, could clearly be made out beneath the black paintwork of the carriages, which were used mainly by seaside holidaymakers and traveled at a maximum speed of sixteen miles per hour. "A train meant for an unknown emperor in China – for reasons that will obviously remain a mystery – now services commuters on holiday in the suburbs of England. The heraldic dragon still on the side of the train becomes a comic metaphor of a "history" that has been almost obliterated; yet the original design comes through as in a palimpsest. So it is with histories writ large and small. The transplanted dragon in exile fades slowly into nothing in the workaday world of quotidian British tourism. History is forever being discarded and reused by the present, which in turn becomes a part of this inevitable and comically grotesque recycling. In Rabelais these aspects of life and death are rendered comical, in Sebald they are tragic. The past insistently haunts the present in ways that rational discourse can not cope with. From *Austerlitz*:

"Whenever I go out at Liverpool Street station on my way back to the East End, said Austerlitz,...and feeling that constant wrenching inside me, a kind of heartache which I was beginning to sense, was caused by the vortex of past time. I knew that on the site

where the station stood marshy meadows had once extended to the city walls, meadows which froze over for months on end in the cold winters of the so-called Little Ice age...”

The narrator then explains that the train station sits in a spot once occupied by a hospital for the insane named Bedlam: “Whenever I was in the station, said Austerlitz, I kept almost obsessively trying to imagine...the location in that huge space of the rooms where the asylum inmates were confined, and I often wondered whether the pain and suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away, or whether they might not still, as I sometimes thought when I felt a cold breath of air on my forehead, be sensed as we pass through them on our way through the station...”

Like Nabokov Sebald believed that all of matter is organically related; so in a sense objects and places share the emotional history of humans and perhaps retained their own “memories”. This synesthesia is Nabokovian at heart and Sebald owes a debt to that author’s *Speak, Memory* – including the use of photographs. Yet in Nabokov the photographs illustrate the text, in Sebald they compound the mystery of the text by using photographs already loaded with narrative possibilities of their own – the two narratives then bounce off each other as in a hall of mirrors. Linear continuity is shattered and in its place there are episodic passages that touch each other (in every sense).

The photographs in Sebald’s work take the narration to another level of reflection that even the characters in the books are unable to see or imagine – it is reflection squared. How does he accomplish this – and even more incredibly – how does he provide an alternative viewpoint away from this narrative hall of mirrors within the same work? In chapter V or *The Rings of Saturn* the ambiguous first person narrator, who seems to be

and not be Sebald at the same time, informs us that he took a holiday to Waterloo where “there were no visitors about on that leaden-grey day shortly before Christmas, but as if they had come to people this deserted stage, a squad of characters in Napoleonic costume suddenly appeared tramping up and down the few streets, beating drums and blowing fifes; and bringing up the rear was a slatternly, garishly made-up woman pulling a curious hand-cart with a goose shut in a cage.” Once again we see Sebald’s familiar and comically ironic juxtapositions of grand “History” and quotidian everyday life that seem as two wholly opposite and irreconcilable forms of matter that as in this case occupy the same space but not the same time. The battle between the combined British and Russian forces against the French at Waterloo in 1815 and the characters (underpaid no doubt!) in Napoleonic costume along with the woman carrying a goose for tourists occupy the same space but are separated by time – the differences between the two groups and the amount of time it took to accomplish those changes is something Sebald thinks through and he makes us feel the weight of that time and the absurdity of these two groups that come to occupy this place which is the same and not the same. The attempt to bring the past to life via characters in period dress happens regularly in various places on earth (such as the Civil War in the USA in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania) with same result – we feel the distance separating us from the traumatic event being narrated much more fiercely than we would otherwise. Is such an endeavor – the re-creation of a past traumatic event even possible? Fellini asks that question and helpfully answers it for us in *Roma* which begins with a bombastic professor of history on a field trip to the Rubicon river leading to Rome forcing his students to cross it while reciting from Caesar’s autobiography – the resulting sardonic stares and laughter tell us that the students know better – Caesar is dust. Fellini

shows us later in the film how *it is* possible to enter into the past – not by quoting from orthodox texts – but through imaginative play. Fellini re-creates an air raid during a performance at a variety theater during the second world war – conjuring (there is no other word) the emotional and historical in a master stroke that pivots the spiritual and the carnal in a plurality of interlocking visual motifs – this pluralism is the essence of the implicit historical critique that Fellini delivers to Mussolini’s Rome, dirty laundry and all. Sebald, a great student of cinema history, follows suit.

The narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* walks into the Waterloo Panorama “housed in an immense domed rotunda, where from a raised platform in the middle one can view the battle – a favorite subject with panorama artists – in every direction – it is like being at the center of events.” Sebald here has some fun with artists for he has them use their skills in perspective to present a false perspective – that is one in which we can see “everything” - by using highly “realistic” multiple viewpoints – an established form for rendering “reality” used from the Renaissance to today. “Across this horrific three-dimensional scene, on which the cold dust of time has settled one’s gaze is drawn to the horizon, to the enormous mural, one hundred and ten yards by twelve, painted in 1912 by the French marine artist Louis Dumontin on the inner wall of the circus-like structure.” One can’t let slip Sebald’s subtle asides. First about the “circus-like structure” suggesting that the attempt to re-create history – or the past – is closer to the entertainments of Barnum and Bailey (or Fellini) than we would like to acknowledge; and secondly that the “marine artist” painted it in 1912 – during the height of World War I – at the time referred to as “the war to end all wars” he is painting a war that was referred to in its time as the

first “total war”. Humanity repeats itself. The narrator sums up: “This then, I thought, as I looked around about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. The desolate field extends all around where once fifty thousand soldiers and ten thousand horses met their end within a few hours. The night after the battle, the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans. Now there is nothing but the silent brown soil. Whatever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really have the much-vaunted historical overview from such a position?” The questions pile up for the narrator and – of course – he cannot answer them. What he does know for certain is that the vantage point created by the panorama artist is false *because of its accuracy*. It is the very fact that the rendering is to “all appearances authentic” that is the cause of the problem. Can one render the deaths of fifty thousand human beings in the space of a few hours? This surely is the difficulty that Resnais and Duras encountered in their film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*: How does one “represent” the death of a hundred thousand human beings in the space of a few seconds by one American bomb? *Hiroshima Mon Amour* circles this problem for 90 minutes before concluding that there is no possible way to begin – one can only speak around it – every conceivable cinematic form is applied and all fail – only when the characters speak of their own pasts can they make any sense of “Hiroshima”. For the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* the “mountain of death” on which he stands is more real – because it is invisible – than the reality that an artist has created of The Battle of Waterloo – because it is visible. More to the point the conventions of painting that make it visible are bankrupt

– they are not capable of bringing the dead to life – or of explaining why such an event occurred. Sebald challenges the passivity of the spectator – a passivity that is aesthetically in line with that of Hollywood, Stalinist spectacles of the post-war era and the advertising art of contemporary consumer society. By acknowledging the bankruptcy of the panorama view we see into its inner workings, its illusory sense of power achieved by putting the viewer literally and figuratively at the center of the action inside the “circus-tent” that houses the Waterloo panorama. But that is not where Sebald leaves it. He goes further into darkness, to show us literally on the page a single image. It’s the opposite of a panorama: a miniature. Yet another artist’s representation of Waterloo with a clearly demarcated foreground, middle-ground and background. It appears to be a Napoleonic battle with smoke, horses, troop formations ... the full panoply of battle rendered carefully with a very fine brush. The full absurdity of the “artistic” approach here reaches its zenith. This is the death of *fifty thousand human beings* reduced to an official stamp, a commemorative plate, a coffee mug. In our time we see this kind of “dramatization” of war most insistently in films from *Birth of a Nation* to *Saving Private Ryan*: the rendering is “to all appearances authentic” – hence its intolerable duplicity. In the Wikipedia entry to “Battle of Waterloo” we see similar representational paintings such as *Wellington at Waterloo* by Robert Alexander Hillingford and *The Battle of Waterloo* by Clement Auguste Andrieux – both academic paintings in which the same aesthetic we saw in the Panorama is still very current. This aesthetic is by no means a thing of the past. The *Rings of Saturn* explicitly shows this kind of “representation” to be a form of fantasy art that conceals much more than it reveals. Photography and representational painting in Sebalds work always pretend to provide a window into the

past but only make us aware that there is a convention of representation at work that is hopelessly unequal to the task of doing what it pretends: to represent something in the past. Attempts at representation are always a form of betrayal in Sebald – what pretends to reveal is really there to conceal, to cover up, to placate, to reassure. Is the horror that horrific? Do we need to see the world only through sentimental conventions that are hopelessly out of date because the “truth” would be too much?

In *The Rings of Saturn* at the last moment before he leaves the Waterloo Panorama the narrator notices an escape clause in the fine print: “Only when I shut my eyes, I will recall, did I see a cannonball smash through a row of poplars at an angle, sending the green branches flying in tatters. And then I saw Fabrizio, Stendahl’s young hero, wandering about the battlefield, pale but with his eyes aglow, and an unsaddled colonel getting to his feet and telling his sergeant: I can feel nothing but the old injury in my right hand”. The narrator can bring the “reality” of Waterloo to himself only by closing his eyes and remembering Stendhal’s *Charterhouse of Parma* – it is the novel itself and the imaginative capacity that can occur between it and a reader that in a sense brings the dead back to life. It accomplishes what they painstaking “realism” of the panorama fails to achieve. In Sebald’s novel the unsaddled colonel gets back to his feet and complains not about the battle he is fighting but an old battle injury to his right hand – he conjures up another past inside of the one the narrator sees with his eyes closed. Pasts always contain pasts within them that take us infinitely back into time, stretched to the breaking point by the histories within histories - and we understand that we can go further but we go no further.

In *Austerlitz* we see a photograph of a pretty girl, about twelve holding a dog on her lap with some dolls at her feet. The photograph has rounded edges that we associate with photo albums from the early 20th century. The narrator in *Austerlitz* explains that a damn had been built where the village of Llandwddyn once stood submerging “at least forty houses and farms, together with the church of St. John of Jerusalem, three chapels and three pubs, all of them drowned when the dam was finished in the autumn of 1888.” Austerlitz then ruminates on “all the others – his parents, his brothers and sisters, his relations, their neighbors, all the other villagers – still down in the depths, sitting in their houses and walking along the road, but unable to speak with their eyes opened far too wide. This notion of mine about the subaquatic existence of the people of Llanwddyn also had something to do with the album which Elias first showed me on our return home that evening containing several photographs of his birthplace, now sunk beneath the water.” In the photograph of the little girl the strange large shrub behind her does look like an underwater plant undulating with the movement of water. Austerlitz let’s his imagination lead him: “...the little girl sitting in a chair in the garden with her little dog on her lap, became as familiar to me as if I were living with them down at the bottom of the lake. At night before I fell asleep in my cold room, I often felt as if I too had been submerged in that dark water...” The effect of looking at pictures here is very close to Barthes’ punctum when looking at the Winter Garden Photograph (of his mother). But Austerlitz never met the girl in the picture, his emotional attachment is purely his own creation. “All the world’s photographs formed a Labyrinth. I knew that at the center of this Labyrinth I would find nothing but this sole picture, fulfilling Nietzsche’s prophecy:

A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth, but only his Ariadne. The Winter Garden Photograph was my Ariadne, not because it would help me discover a sacred thing (monster or treasure), but because it would tell me what constituted that thread which drew me toward Photography. “ Barthes here gets to the heart of Sebald’s emotional need to enter photography – that is to find his family intact – the Photograph is the key that unlocks the imaginative universe that was for Austerlitz lost in time. One sees that same need at the end of Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* where the main character – an old professor - remembers – or imagines he remembers – his parents as young, fully and deliriously in the moment swimming in a lake, and inviting him into the water to come and play. It’s an image of reconciliation and acceptance that for the professor in Bergman’s film links him to a past that calls to him as part of a chain of being – as it does Barthes in the imaginative presence of the Winter Garden Photograph and in turn Austerlitz in the picture of the girl in front of a house holding the treasures from her childhood for just a second while a picture is taken.

We get closer to the essence of Sebald’s photographic inquiry when Austerlitz is shown a photograph of himself as a five year old dressed as a page-boy in *Austerlitz*. He reflects that it is “as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives.” Later he claims to have examined the photograph in great detail with a magnifying glass “without once finding the slightest clue. And is doing so I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting in the gray light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and

avert the misfortune lying ahead of him.” Immediately after this scene he significantly recalls a dream where “I dreamed of returning to the flat in Prague after a long absence. All the furniture is in its proper place. I know that my parents will soon be back from their holiday, and there is something important I must give them. I am not aware that they have been dead for years. I simply think that they must be very old, around ninety or a hundred, as indeed they would be if they were still alive. But when at last they come through the door they are in their mid-thirties at most.” The link to Bergman’s aesthetic is most acute in this scene. In the following page Sebald sums up on these reflections this way: “It does not seem to me Austerlitz added, that we do not understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between the living and the dead...” Sterometry is the measurement of volumes such as a sphere or a cylinder using geometry. Austerlitz is still searching for a coherent system (is there a more rational one than geometry?) that will answer the riddle of time. That he went searching for answers in a photograph is logical since photography does in a literal sense combine geometry and time - and found that the picture looked back at him across an abyss. In the symbolic dream with his parents Austerlitz had something important to give them - surely that thing is himself – and the photograph is a trace of that exchange.

The detritus of everyday life such as discarded railway tickets take on a powerful role in the narratives as evidence of a life that once was and is no more. Personal histories parallel the larger historical parts of the narrative but never in a one to one relationship; there is always some attenuation, some digression that links up with other obscure facts

that make each situation unique and peculiar. Every moment of the present in Sebald is an eccentric and mysterious intersection of possibilities in which thousands of years of planned and chance encounters have come down to “this moment”. This makes each of these precious moments or presents – what we mere mortals call *now* - a window of opportunity and a stage on which chance and fate play their respective parts. This evanescent “now” then vanishes into the past along with everything else irredeemably lost to us. This loss creates a sense of horror – as it does in the work of Milan Kundera - who is astonished that even the meal he had a few days before is not merely a sketchy memory but already lost forever into the abyss of “History”. Such a sensibility – highly sensitive, ironic and skeptical cannot help but see comedy and tragedy, pivotal historical moments and everyday life, as an organic whole. In a sense this holistic, organic viewpoint of Sebald’s - and Kundera’s - makes every moment precious since it is pre-ordained that it must like everything else pass into oblivion or into some cosmological sense of time that we can probably never hope to understand. In that sense Sebald’s writing stands very far from that of contemporary critical theorists and their illustrators in the world of fine art and academic literature. The fashionable idea in academies for the last few decades has been that all areas of human activity, such as sexual preferences, personal identity and forms of expression are culturally determined. In short it should be possible to understand oneself and others scientifically as there is a coherent system already in place (structuralism or whatever that might be) to attain that understanding. For Sebald this is not the case. Culture is as determined by biological and physiological necessity as biology and physiology come to be affected by culture. They are in a symbiotic relation whose complex interrelationship is beyond understanding. We can

only infer and see glimpses. Sebald consciously went against the prevailing orthodoxy of his time not as an iconoclast – any label would fit him uneasily – but as an artist fascinated by the complex organic minutiae of the quotidian at the expense of any theory that might explain that reality by fitting it into an organized system of knowledge. The only resort left to such a sensibility is poetry and Sebald is in essence a prose poet who comes face to face with his own mortality and an inability to conclusively comprehend history – his own to say nothing of all of the multitude of histories present at any one time simultaneously.

Sebald described the present better than anyone at the end of a century that saw more people die violently or go into exile than any before it – a considerable record. The only way to convey the seriousness of these themes for him was with the full weight of history felt in every page. Only then could he achieve the overall effect that his work produces: We sense that we have seen the past in the form of the tip of an iceberg. The glimpse into this “vortex of time” is dizzying for we intuit what might be under that tip. The author describes coexistent multiplicities perceived by a consciousness that is able to – if only for a moment – see itself in relation to its own pasts: personal, historical, anthropological, geological, and cosmological. These worlds act like an assortment of atoms of various densities in a controlled experiment – as in a supercollider - whose final aim seems to be the elucidation of a soul pressed upon by history. Yet for Sebald in a sense there was no “History” and there was no “Humanity”. There were – and are - only specific individuals caught in specific places and times. “History” and “Humanity” are only concepts, marble statues that resemble us in form but lack all content, all depth, all

“reality”. Sebald in his novels returns this “reality” to us in fragments. Broken to bits and filtered through various conventions because that is how we find it: piecemeal and incomplete. That’s us. His sense of ethics with respect to his narrative voice was profound. Other books and works of art suffer in comparison. It is impossible to look at the shallow, ironic fine art works of our time in that sense without a feeling of moral revulsion. Sebald’s writing plays with serious themes in a literary tradition that has all but vanished, and the melancholic voices we hear – and see in photographs - is a brilliant portrait – an elegy of our time and place with many of the living and the dead who never found their way into History finally finding a voice.

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